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ABSTRACT

A discussion of second language program evaluation is intended for staff (teachers, program planners, materials writers, program managers) of programs being evaluated, to help them understand the process and dynamics of program evaluation. It addresses common concerns and fears about evaluation, offers ways in which staff can cooperate with evaluators or defend themselves against inadequately trained or insensitive evaluators, and provides practical suggestions for becoming active participants. First, the difference between applied linguistics research (classroom or institutional) and program evaluation are enumerated, and a distinction is made between advocacy and evaluation. It is suggested that a research-like procedure can masquerade as evaluation, and eight ways in which program staff can turn this procedure into a cooperative process are outlined. All revolve around clear communication between staff, source of funding for the study, and researcher. (MSE)

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HOW PROGRAM PERSONNEL CAN HELP MAXIMIZE THE UTILITY OF LANGUAGE PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

Ronald Mackay

1. THE SOURCE OF THE CONTENT OF THIS PAPER

This paper is based on my own experience as a researcher and as an evaluator in the field of language teaching and applied linguistics. It has been derived directly from a textbook which I am in the process of preparing for publication. My interest in language program evaluation has been a natural development arising out of my work in first teaching, then designing curricula and in materials writing. Over the past decade I have been involved in a dozen program evaluations. Some of these have been small-scale, involving individual programs, small numbers of teachers and students, offering minimal financial resources for the evaluation activity and only one evaluator. Other evaluations have been quite extensive, involving entire provincial and territorial school systems, scores of schools, and budgets in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

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2. THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is not to outline to you what you must learn in order to become a program evaluator yourself. There are dozens of "How To .." books in the field of programme evaluation. Some are good, some bad and some merely indifferent. Furthermore, not everyone wants, and still fewer have the opportunity to leave teaching or program management for the full-time practice of evaluation. On the contrary, this paper is directed at those who staff language programs which are likely to be evaluated at some time or other. It is directed at teachers, program planners, materials writers and program managers in order to help them understand what might happen when their program comes up for evaluation. Its purpose is to help them overcome their understandable concerns and fears surrounding the evaluation process; to show them ways in which they can cooperate with the evaluator and also ways they can defend themselves against inadequately trained or insensitive evaluators. Most of all, its purpose is to provide them with specific practical and workable suggestions as to how they can become active participants in any evaluation of their program. Participation helps to ensure that the results of the evaluation will address their concerns, their questions and their interests, reflect their perceptions and contribute to their aspirations, and not merely those of some outside evaluator who, like the proverbial cat, crept in, evaluated, and crept out again.

3. SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

3.1 Why Do I Consider It Necessary For Program Staff to Learn What I Have, Only Semi-Humourously, Called "Self-Defence" ?

First of all because program evaluation in our field of second language teaching and applied linguistics so far offers little in the way of training for potential evaluators, and has articulated no professional standards with which evaluators are urged to comply. Hence many different kinds of person can assume the title of 'evaluator' and many practices of varying kinds and quality are undertaken in the name of 'evaluation'.

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Rather than focus upon the matter in a negative way, I will briefly outline to you the positive steps that are being taken in Canada to deal with the growing interest in evaluation. Six years ago the Canadian Evaluation Society was established with these objectives :

- * To provide a forum whereby program managers, administrators, policy-makers, practitioners teachers and students can discuss the theory and practice of evaluation in Canada;
- * To promote the high quality of evaluation of public and private programs throughout the country;
- * To develop theories, standards, and practices of evaluation;
- * To promote training programs in planning the design, strategy, methods, analysis and application of results for all types of evaluation;
- * To provide a forum of exchange on policies, practices, applications and sources of funding for evaluation.

The C.E.S. draws its membership from a diverse group of professionals in the public private and academic communities who share a common interest in evaluation. They represent disciplines ranging from psychology sociology, social work, economics, health sciences, administration, political science, and policy sciences to accounting, engineering and urban and regional planning. The C.E.S. holds a national convention, publishes a journal and a newsletter, and is organized around regional groups which arrange meetings and professional development sessions for their members.

This is one way of tackling the growth of and interest in evaluation - namely to encourage the professional development of those who practice evaluation. This paper is another, complimentary way of tackling the issue - namely it encourages the interest of program staff in becoming more informed about evaluation and its implications so that they can participate with the evaluator in the evaluation process and so that evaluation is not something that is done to them, but for them and with their consent, cooperation, and understanding.

3.2 "What is the Difference Between Research and Evaluation ?"

Applied linguistics research and second language program evaluation are for the most part two different and distinct activities. They can be distinguished from each other on a number of counts. Some of the differences listed below (see also, Popham 1975; Patton 1986; Worthen and Sanders 1987) overlap somewhat, and the list is not exhaustive.:

THE IDENTIFIABILITY OF THE CLIENTS

Research is not usually carried out for an identifiable client. Research tends to be funded by governmental or philanthropic organizations, but it is not carried out for their benefit. An evaluation is funded by a sponsor who may be equally as faceless as a government department or a philanthropic organization but is carried out for a specific client or group of clients, one of whom may or may not be the funder. These clients are identifiable as individual people with a particular identifiable interest or stake (as it is called) in the results of the evaluation.

THE RELATIVE INDEPENDENCE OF THE INQUIRER

Researchers in effect work for themselves in the sense that they decide what question to research, what focus they will adopt, what variables they will manipulate, which they will hold constant and which they will ignore altogether. Evaluators on the other hand answer questions posed by stakeholders, focus on the latters' concerns and interests and examine issues selected by those funding, managing, teaching in or in some other way affected by the program. Researchers normally initiate their own research projects based on their own personal curiosity and interests. They decide what they want to investigate and then seek the funds from an appropriately sympathetic organization to carry out the investigation. Evaluators respond to the information needs of others, normally stakeholders in a particular program.

THE USEFULNESS OF THE INQUIRY

Research is not motivated by immediate utility, whereas evaluation is. The results of an evaluation will be used by a client or by different groups of clients (called the stakeholders) to answer their questions, confirm their suspicions, and inform their decisions concerning one or more aspects of the program that they design, manage, operate, teach in, learn in or are in some way or another affected by.

THE MOTIVATION OF THE INQUIRER

The researcher is motivated by a desire to expand the frontiers of human knowledge; the evaluator is motivated by the desire to provide illuminating answers to specific questions posed by specific stakeholders about a specific program in a particular context.

THE OBJECT OF THE INQUIRY

Research strives to further knowledge, serve truth and broaden our understanding of the world and the types of phenomena (e.g. types of programs) and so tries to focus on the typical obtained by means of random sampling (or some similarly scientific strategy of selection) within the populations they wish to generalize to. Evaluation, on the other hand, is concerned with the interests and concerns of specific people involved with specific programs and so focuses on the individual project within its own unique context.

GENERALIZABILITY

The researcher seeks to uncover the general laws of nature usually by means of establishing significant relationships between variables. Evaluators focus on specific contexts, particular programs with all their individual constraints and idiosyncracies. Whereas the researcher wants to make strong and broad generalizations the evaluator wants to enlighten individual stakeholders involved with individual programs. Researchers seek to uncover general laws which govern human learning. Evaluators seek to describe a specific program identifiable in time and place, in an illuminating way, and, in the process, to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

THE ROLE OF EXPLANANTION

Researchers seek to explain the stable relationships between variables ideally in a cause and effect relationship. Evaluators seek to provide credible explanations to stakeholders for what is occurring in their program so that specific adjustments might be made to improve it.

RELEVANCE OF TIME*

More often than not, the researcher works to self-imposed deadlines. These deadlines derive from factors extrinsic to the research - dates related to the university calendar, dates related to the annual calendar for funding by grant agencies. The value of research results are unlikely to be wiped out if the research project is completed a little behind schedule. Evaluators work to deadlines intrinsic to the project that they are evaluating. Stakeholders require information by certain times so that effective decisions can be made. Information received from a tardy evaluator one day after a major project planning meeting of the stakeholders may render that information generated by the evaluation totally useless.

DISCIPLINE LOYALTY*

Research normally is undertaken within the well-defined (but often arbitrary) parameters of specific disciplines. Evaluations seldom demand loyalty to one particular discipline and often involve the evaluation team working cooperatively across specialization boundaries.

SOME REASONS FOR THE CONFUSION BETWEEN EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

First, training courses for second language program evaluators are uncommon but instruction in research methods based on the experimental paradigm are not. Thus even the most willing of evaluators may be the victims of one particular, and very limited, frame of reference. Second, when research funds are tight, enterprising researchers may seek evaluation contracts to continue their research work, consciously or unconsciously defining the focus of the evaluation to coincide with their own interests. Third, some sponsors of evaluations may make money available for an evaluation without providing adequate terms of reference for the evaluation, thus leaving the researcher to determine the focus and direction of the activity him or herself.

3.3 What is the difference between functioning as an evaluator and functioning as an advocate?

Evaluation and advocacy are legitimate activities and both may be conducted in a professional manner. The function of an advocate however is to present a program in the best possible light in order to influence the decisions made by a major information user - usually the funder - in a particular way - usually to continue funding or to increase the funds for the program in question. The function of an evaluator cannot be so one-sided. An evaluator who functions as an advocate will lose his/her credibility as an independent judge.

Some professionals, those who are committed to one of the many forms of social reform, for example, may believe that their moral duty is to advocate. There is nothing wrong with that so long as they are up-front about their position and do not present themselves or their activities as evaluation.

4. A RESEARCH-LIKE PROCEDURE WHICH MASQUERADES AS EVALUATION

When research masquerades as evaluation, it tends to follow a particular process (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1

RESEARCH - LIKE EVALUATION PROCEDURE

FUNDER INITIATES

EVALUATOR DECIDES FOCUS

EVALUATOR DESIGNS EVALUATION

EVALUATOR GATHERS DATA

EVALUATOR ANALYSES DATA

EVALUATOR INTERPRETS DATA

EVALUATOR MAKES RECOMMENDATIONS

EVALUATOR WRITES REPORT

EVALUATOR DEPOSITS REPORT

FUNDER RECEIVES REPORT

RESEARCH-LIKE EVALUATION PROCEDURE

This not uncommon research-like procedure which is sometimes passed of by its practitioners (purposely or unconsciously) as evaluation has little time for the stakeholder's concerns and allows little opportunity for input from the program staff except at those points where the researcher unilaterally decides that it is necessary for his or her purposes to obtain information, usually of a predetermined kind, from them.

5. How can program staff make a difference ?

Thus far we have painted a pretty dismal picture - research which masquerades as evaluation, evaluators who are insensitive to the stakeholders, advocates in disguise, funders who disburse funds without due care and attention to what will be given in return..... How can we as program staff change the picture ? How can we as program staff ensure that the researcher does not run away with the evaluation funds for his or her own purposes which may have marginal or even no relevance to the purposes of the principal information users and the other stakeholders ? How can we as program staff get what we want and need out of a program evaluation ?

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to suggesting ways that program staff can go about gaining a foothold in the evaluation activities and by so doing, become instrumental modifying, to a greater or lesser extent, the research-like process. I will deal with ways staff can intervene in two parts. The first part will deal with early and successful intervention and will show the **cooperative evaluation process** which results. The second part will deal with later and less successful intervention, and will illustrate what I call the **utility enhanced evaluation process**. In this paper I will not deal with a third part which shows program staff what action might be appropriate when it becomes clear that their attempts at gaining access to the evaluation process are doomed to failure. You will have to buy the book to find that out !

5.1 Turning the Research-Like Procedure Into A Cooperative Process

I will take the research-like process discussed above and suggest how, early on in that process, the stakeholders can gain a foothold and so help ensure that the evaluation results in a report that can be used by them.

Let's start at the very beginning at the point where the **Funder Initiates an Evaluation**, in Fig. 1.

For any program, somebody holds the purse strings to the fund from which any evaluation to be undertaken will be financed. Sometimes the holder of the purse strings is not a major information user or even not a stakeholder at all. This is the case in many government sponsored programs. In yet other cases, the funder is a stakeholder and a potential information user and may know virtually nothing about evaluation and so hires an evaluator to take control. Sometimes the funder simply assumes that he or she is the only person interested in the evaluation and does not even consider that others may have a substantial stake in any inquiry and may have questions which they would like answered in order to make program-related decisions.

This stage, because it is the point at which the evaluation is initiated, is the most crucial stage at which program staff can help to influence the entire subsequent evaluation process. The very first task of the enterprising and concerned stakeholder is to find answers to the following questions :

#1 FIND ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS :

- Is it planned that the program will be evaluated ?**
- If so, when is it scheduled to happen ?**
- Where will the funds come from ?**
- How much will they amount to ?**
- Are there any constraints upon the type of evaluation that must be carried out ?**

For example does the plan specify whether it will be an internal or an external evaluation ? Will it be formative or summative ? Will it be undertaken for a predetermined purpose, e.g. to determine whether the program should be expanded to other schools, provinces or states ? or whether there are more cost-effective ways of achieving the same results ? or whether the program is achieving the purposes for which it was originally mounted ?

When you have found accurate answers to these questions, and you have established that there is the potential for your interests in the program to be addressed, ask yourself, "What do I need to know about this program ?" and "How will I use that information ?" Notice that the operative words here are 'need' and 'use'. It is as a potential user of evaluative information that you have the right to intervene or to gain access to the evaluation process, not simply as a curious by-stander. For example, as a teacher you might need to know if the strategy of selective error-correction that you are employing is having immediate and or lasting effects on student production so that you can continue, modify or discontinue the practice; as a materials writer or as a head teacher, you might need to know if your materials are being used in the way and under the conditions they were intended to be used, etc.. Once you have identified the information you need :

#2 LET THE FUNDER KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS YOU REQUIRE ANSWERS TO, OR ISSUES THAT YOU WISH TO HAVE ADDRESSED.

In other words, let the funder know that you are a stakeholder, and precisely what your stake is in the evaluation. This may come as a surprise to a funder who has not given consideration to any program staff as being stakeholders.

#3 TELL THE FUNDER HOW YOU WOULD MAKE USE OF THE INFORMATION GENERATED BY THE EVALUATION

In other words, let the funder know that you have given serious consideration to your stake in the evaluation and that addressing your concerns or questions is important for the future of the program.

If, at this stage, the funder embraces you as a full partner in the evaluation process, most of your serious problems are over. You have switched right over from the danger that a **research-like procedure** will be employed to the likelihood that a **cooperative procedure** (Fig. 2) will be adopted.

Figure 2
COOPERATIVE EVALUATION PROCEDURE

FUNDER INITIATES

CLIENT AND STAKEHOLDERS IDENTIFY PIU'S

CLIENT AND PIU'S IDENTIFY Questions and Concerns

CLIENT AND PIU'S IDENTIFY USE

CLIENT AND PIU'S DRAW UP Request for Proposals

CONTRACTORS SUBMIT TENDERS

CLIENT (AND PIU'S) SELECT WINNER

CLIENT DRAWS UP CONTRACT

CLIENT AWARDS CONTRACT

EVALUATOR CONDUCTS EVALUATION ACCORDING TO CONTRACT

But do not relax your attention or your guard! There is a great deal of solid work to do, however. Once the funder has agreed that the concerns other than simply those of the funder should be addressed, the matter of who the other principal information users (PIU's) are and the issue of who addresses their questions (i.e. who the evaluator is), is no longer a trivial question. Any evaluator hired, has to be able to address the stakeholders' concerns and questions, and tackle the task of answering them in a manner appropriate to your requirements, within the time constraints imposed by the need for subsequent action, and within the financial constraints imposed by the evaluation budget. No small task to administer !

The formal way of finding an evaluator to do all this, is by listing the requirements of the stakeholders into a document called a Request for Proposals usually referred to as the RFP. The minimum contents of the RFP are :

1. a description of the context of the program
2. a clear statement of the purposes of the evaluation

3. a list of the stakeholders in the evaluation
4. a list of the principal information users
5. the time frame within which the evaluation must be completed
6. the financial resources available for the evaluation
7. the form(s) in which the final report(s) is/are to be presented.

Potential evaluators are then invited to respond, at their own expense, to the RFP in a competitive process known as 'tendering'. The tender is usually advertised in periodicals read by the kind of professional you are seeking to attract. Alternatively, the stakeholders might suggest three or four names of individuals or groups known to have the skills required to address the contents of the RFP.

Adequate responses to the RFP should :

1. be clear, concise and jargon-free
2. clearly itemize all the costs involved in the proposed evaluation
3. show the qualifications and experience of the evaluator(s) to undertake the evaluation
4. clearly specify the tasks that would be undertaken (and their sequence) in order to complete the evaluation
5. give time-lines for each task
6. describe the methodology that would be used and how it would achieve the purposes of the evaluation
7. demonstrate convincingly that all the questions in the RFP would be answered appropriately

You and the funder, in your new cooperative relationship, can examine the potential evaluators' responses to the RFP and choose the one that meets your needs most closely. Once an evaluator has been chosen, the funder enters into a formal contractual agreement with him/her. The contract will, as a minimum, specify :

1. what the duties of the evaluator are
2. what the responsibilities of the funder are
3. what the total budget will be
4. how and when the evaluator will be paid
5. how the evaluation work plan can be amended (if at all)
6. who the person acting as liaison between the evaluator and the funder is

5.2 Turning the Research-Like Procedure into a Utility-Enhanced Procedure

Let us imagine, for the purposes of the rest of the paper, that the funder has retained the services of an evaluator without consulting the stakeholders. What then? How can you, the stakeholders gain a foothold in the evaluation process? For the purposes of this paper, I will not deal with every step of attempting to convert the Research-like process into a utility-enhanced process, nor will I give a large number of suggestions or examples. I am sufficiently realistic to realize that if I were to be exhaustive, you would go to sleep, and sufficiently mercenary to fear that you might not buy my book when it appears!! So I will be relatively succinct, and selective.

So let us start one step on in the research-like process where **The Funder Retains the Services of an Evaluator (Fig 1.)**

At this point it is invaluable to have the stakeholders participate as a group, identify their needs and concerns, become familiar with the needs and concerns of their fellows, and agree, if at all possible, upon a hierarchically ordered of questions that they would like to see addressed. So,

#4 MEET WITH THE OTHER STAKEHOLDERS AND HAVE THEM IDENTIFY WHAT INFORMATION THEY REQUIRE FROM THE EVALUATION AND HOW THEY WILL USE THAT INFORMATION

It must be borne in mind that the stakeholders **must** be able to show how the answers to their questions will be used to make decisions about the program. Questions asked out of curiosity, no matter how interesting they may be, or information which cannot be used are not legitimate concerns to present to the evaluator. For example, the project manager might like to know whether the teachers with more experience, or the teachers with more recent qualifications are having the greater success in implementing a new set of materials involving non-traditional classroom interaction. However, if because of union agreements there is no possibility of removing the less successful group or even of insisting on obligatory in-service training for them, the information, interesting though it may be, is not capable of being acted upon and so the question is not a legitimate one for the evaluation to address.

#5 TALK TO THE EVALUATOR

Program staff may feel that it is somehow "not fitting" to talk to the evaluator about the program and about his/her plans for evaluating it; or they may feel discouraged by the evaluator appearing to want to hold them at arms length from his/her activities. However, not only is it fitting to talk to the evaluator, it is essential to talk to him or her.

#6 ASK THE EVALUATOR TO EXPLAIN TO YOU AND THE OTHER STAKEHOLDERS HIS/HER APPROACH TO AND VIEWS ON 'GOOD EVALUATION'

A good evaluator can explain where he/she is coming from and what he/she is doing, in the language of the stakeholders. If the evaluator cannot, then the evaluator is not worth hiring. An evaluator who has one and only one perspective on evaluation and tries to impose that upon the program and the program staff is not worth hiring. But (for the purposes of this paper at least) the evaluator has already been retained! So:

- #7 **LET THE EVALUATOR KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO WHICH YOU REQUIRE ANSWERS OR CONCERNS WHICH YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE ADDRESSED.**

- #8 **LET THE EVALUATOR KNOW HOW YOU WOULD MAKE USE OF THE INFORMATION GENERATED BY THE EVALUATION IF IT WERE TO ADDRESS THESE QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS**

A good evaluator will be interested in the perspectives of the stakeholders - their views on what they believe evaluation to be, how it is carried out, how they conceive of their program, what their concerns are and what they believe their information needs to be and why. If you let the evaluator know that you are counting on the results of the evaluation to obtain specific information which is otherwise unavailable in order to take action in some area of the program it is likely that he/she will not ignore your request. No evaluator worth his or her salt will choose to ignore questions asked by stakeholders who are also principal information users in favour of self-generated questions. A good evaluator will help the stakeholders to discover the right relationship between his/her expertise and their own contribution. A good evaluator will appreciate the feeling of self worth that can be fostered by encouraging the stakeholders to participate in the evaluation. Conversely, he/she will understand the feelings of suspicion, hostility, and disempowerment which will be engendered in the stakeholders if they are held at arms length, their concerns spurned, their questions ignored and their participation rejected. One of the principal advantages to be gained from an evaluation is the enlightenment gained by the stakeholders from an understanding of and participation in the process itself.

If, at this point, the evaluator demonstrates a willingness to work with the stakeholder group as partners in the evaluation, you have achieved an early entry into the value-enhanced process. It is clearly by no means an identical process to that described as cooperative above (Fig. 2), because you are stuck with an evaluator you did not select on the basis of a request for proposals and this evaluator despite his or her current willingness, may never have worked cooperatively with a stakeholder group before, or he/she may have a very limited perceptual framework for conducting evaluations, or he/she may at any time feel threatened by the new relationship and wish to end it. Time prevents me from offering you suggestions as to how to handle the various problems that can arise from this point on. Time also prevents me from offering you suggestions as to what you can do if your appeals to the evaluator at this step are unsuccessful. Suffice it to say that what we have called the value enhanced model of programme evaluation is limited in its usefulness to programme staff in proportion to the point at which you gain entry to the process. The earlier you gain entry, the greater the opportunity for you to influence the focus of the evaluation, the type of data collected and to participate in the interpretation phase and therefore the more potential for utility the results of the evaluation will have.

6. CONCLUSION

You will, however, no doubt appreciate that if you have failed at this point, it may be even more difficult (but certainly not impossible) to gain access to the process at one of the later stages. Nevertheless, the potential for increasing the utility of an evaluation diminishes in direct relation to the tardiness of the phase at which you get entry. It is likely that there is a point of diminishing returns and a whole new strategy involving a different type of thinking is required if you should be so unfortunate as to reach that point without having persuaded the evaluator to allow you into the process. If you are unsuccessful in gaining access to the

evaluation process at all, then you simply end up with a researcher-directed study masquerading as evaluation! Such a study may be instrumental in furthering the researchers' interests by providing him/her with a publication or even a higher degree, but it will be unlikely to be of use or even of much interest to programme staff concerned about improving their activities or finding answers to questions which they require to make informed decisions.

I hope, however, that I have been successful not only in persuading you as program personnel that it is worth gaining access to the evaluation process, but also in showing you some practical ways by means of which you might successfully become a respected partner in the evaluation of your own program.

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